

PPR202 Ethics: Theory & Practice

Part 1: Michaelmas 2011

Dr Sam Clark

We can only learn to philosophize, that is, to exercise the talent of reason, in accordance with its universal principles, on certain actually existing attempts at philosophy, always, however, reserving the right of reason to investigate, to confirm, or to reject these principles in their very sources. –Immanuel Kant¹

One pretty good definition of college is that it's a place where people are made to read difficult books. –Jonathan Franzen²

Overview

This term, we'll use close readings of three classic texts to investigate some central issues in moral philosophy, including freedom, rules, goodness, and the roles of reason and passion in action. Our project is to engage with the attempts of three very different geniuses to answer an obvious, pressing, difficult question: *how should one live?* Timetabled contact hours are a 1½-hour lecture and a 1-hour seminar per week, but the majority of the course consists of independent study. Assessment is by coursework essay (this term) and exam (Summer term).

Books to Buy

Our texts are:

David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861)

A major part of this course's point is that you read and think seriously about these three influential, troubling books, and you therefore need to buy your own copies. The editions I recommend are:

David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals* ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford University Press 1998)

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* trans. Arnulf Zweig, ed. Thomas E. Hill Jr (Oxford University Press 2002)

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* ed. Roger Crisp (Oxford University Press 1998)

These are excellent modern editions intended for students and scholars, and contain helpful introductions and suggestions for further reading. They're available from the campus bookshop, or online (amazon.co.uk and abebooks.co.uk often have second-hand copies). However, any modern scholarly edition will do (that doesn't include free downloads from www.gutenberg.org, useful though those are for other purposes). Note that the Kant text has been given various titles by different translators: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Mary J. Gregor); *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Lewis White Beck); *The Moral Law* (H. J. Paton). Don't confuse it with Kant's later work *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797).

¹ *Critique of Pure Reason* trans. Norman Kemp Smith (Macmillan 1929), p. 657 (A838/B866).

² 'Mr. Difficult' in *How To Be Alone* (Harper Perennial 2004): 238-69, p. 245.

Contacts

Lecturer & seminar tutor: Dr Sam Clark—sam.clark@lancs.ac.uk

Office hours, Michaelmas term: Mondays, 1-3pm, County South B28

PPR Part II Coordinator: Mrs Jane Wigston—j.wigston@lancs.ac.uk

Director of Part II Studies in Philosophy: Dr Nick Unwin—n.unwin@lancs.ac.uk

PPR Undergraduate Director: Dr Graham Smith—g.m.smith@lancs.ac.uk

My Responsibilities

- **Course:** I designed this term's part of the course, and am interested in feedback and reasoned critique on any aspect of it, including but not limited to topics, texts, and teaching and assessment strategies.
- **Lectures:** My lectures are intended to draw you into expert discussion of our topics and to provide a model of the philosophical and scholarly practice I'm asking you to take up. They are not intended to summarise the set reading (or else why read it?), nor to cover all possible viewpoints neutrally (I am not Wikipedia), nor to list all the things you need to know in order to pass (there is no such list).
- **Seminars:** Seminars aim at the Socratic ideal of imaginative, sceptical, truth-directed conversation between friends. Obviously, I'll often take a leading role in that conversation—because I've had more practice than you—but I expect you to work hard at it too. Seminars will be conducted on the assumption that you are fulfilling your responsibilities (see below).
- **Support:** I'm available to talk to you one-to-one about any aspect of the course in my weekly drop-in office hours, or at other times by appointment.
- **Assessment:** I set and mark the coursework, and the section of the exam, for this term's work.
- **Access:** I will make all reasonable efforts to ensure equal access to opportunities for learning for all of my students. If there's something I could do, or stop doing, or do differently to help, please let me know.

Your Responsibilities

- **Active attendance (mind as well as body):** Pay attention to lectures; contribute to seminar discussions. Attendance at lectures is not compulsory, but they're an integral part of the course: you'll get much less than you could out of this term's work, and find things harder than necessary, if you miss them. Attendance at seminars is compulsory, unless you have good reason (e.g. illness) not to come, in which case you should let me and the Part II Coordinator know, in advance if at all possible. We may require medical or other evidence to explain absence.
- **Set reading:** Read and think about the set reading every week. Note that the reading is difficult, that it will take time and effort, and that if you don't do it, you're not going to get much out of the course. I will distribute set reading assignments as we go along. As a rough plan, week 1 will be introductory, and then we'll spend weeks 2-4 on Hume, 5-6 on Kant, and 7-9 on Mill (there will be no lectures or seminars in week 10). The majority of the readings will be from the set texts, but I will often add extra pieces of reading, which I will distribute online or in photocopy.
- **Independent study:** Find, read, and think about further scholarly work; pursue your own thinking about our topics. The major part of this course—as of any humanities course—is independent study: reading and thinking about the set reading, and then going beyond it by finding, reading, and thinking about further scholarly work, and by pursuing your own thinking, on our topics. Places to start include companions, textbooks, and the editors' introductions in the recommended editions of the set texts;

encyclopaedias like the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Online*, and the University Library's catalogue, which has some useful advanced search functions. Randomly searching the web is unlikely to turn up relevant high-quality work: it does exist, but it's a drop in the ocean of muddle, axe-grinding, and self-confident ignorance. Note that by 'places to start' I mean exactly that: these secondary sources are ways to find further primary reading, not all the reading you should be doing.

- **Assessment:** Plan, research, and write an essay (see the **Essay Questions** and their accompanying notes below); prepare for and take an exam in Summer term. Your essay for this term is worth 20% of your overall mark for the course; the rest of the mark is made up of an essay for the Lent term segment (20%) and the final exam on both segments (60%).
- **Contact:** Regularly check for email and online updates. There is a LUVLE forum for the module, and I encourage you to use it as a supplement to our official contact hours. I rely on the forum and email if I need to get in touch with you at short notice, so please check both regularly.

Essay Questions

1. How does human action work, and what does this mean for morality? Answer with reference to at least two of *Enquiry*, *Groundwork*, & *Utilitarianism*.
2. What role is played in morality by the human tendency to sympathise with others? Answer with reference to at least two of *Enquiry*, *Groundwork*, & *Utilitarianism*.
3. What is the best life for a human being? Answer with reference to at least two of *Enquiry*, *Groundwork*, & *Utilitarianism*.
4. What are the standards of correctness for moral judgement? Answer with reference to at least two of *Enquiry*, *Groundwork*, & *Utilitarianism*.
5. A question of your own invention, agreed in advance with me. You should approach me about this early, and I reserve the right to turn you down. I'm more likely to agree to questions which take you outside the subject matter of the lectures, and which ask for controversial judgements rather than mere survey or comparison.

Essay Submission

The essay must be handed in by 10am on Monday 5th December (Monday week 9 of this term).

Essays submitted after this time will be considered late. You must submit two copies of your essay. One should be printed and posted in the essay submission box in the Department. The other should be submitted electronically via LUVLE. Instructions for electronic submission can be found in the PPR *Undergraduate Handbook*. Be aware that your essay will be considered late if you do not submit both paper and electronic copy by the deadline. You should note that, following a decision by the University Senate, there is now no period of grace: work that is even a day late will be penalized. You should also note that just because term has ended it is not the case that the University shuts down. Thus, non-term time is also included when calculating the 'lateness' of essays.

Essays should be 2,500 words in length. Essays which do not contain a complete bibliography, or which do not use references, will be penalized as they fail to meet academic standards. Plagiarism (which is passing off someone else's ideas or work as your own) will not be tolerated. For advice on writing essays and details of Departmental rules concerning the late submission of coursework see the Department's *Undergraduate Handbook*. You are also encouraged to consult your tutor about your essay during their office hours.

Notes on the Essay

Your task in this essay is to make a reasoned case for a distinctive answer to your question, taking account of objections and alternative answers, and displaying an engaged familiarity with our set texts. The fundamental thing you should keep in mind is that philosophy is a kind of rational inquiry: it aims at finding things out by reasoning. Each of the questions should therefore be understood as having an invisible final clause: argue rationally for your answer.

The questions could be approached in various ways, drawing on various texts, problems, and arguments. You need to decide how to interpret and respond to your question in the light of the term's work as a whole, and then address it using relevant material from the lectures and seminars, the set texts, and your own independent study.

Writing philosophy at this level requires three fundamental skills:

- (1) *Exposition* of the set and other texts—making clear, in your own words and structure, what their arguments are (and referencing them properly). Do not rely on long quotations from set texts or, even worse, from secondary sources: show me that you've thought through the difficulties of the texts and come to your own understanding of them.
- (2) *Organisation* of your essay into a clear, question-focussed form consisting of distinct, relevant parts each of which advances the whole. This requires planning and redrafting: do not write off the top of your head, or without an outline, or without reviewing.
- (3) *Argument*, via engagement with counter-arguments, for a definite conclusion of your own. Do not dodge the question with 'it depends on what you believe' or 'it's subjective': respect your opponents, give their reasoning its due, and make the case for your answer to the question by showing exactly why the balance of reasons favours it over the alternatives.

Essays which merely summarise material from lectures and secondary sources, or which don't answer the specific question set, or which fail to reach a definite conclusion, will do badly. Essays which demonstrate first-hand knowledge of the set texts, engage with controversy, give reasons for distinctive conclusions, recognise and address counter-arguments, and hang together as a single, directed piece of philosophical writing, will do well. There is no need to survey the field or to report my lectures back to me: the main thing your essay should do is argue for a textually-informed conclusion, and you should therefore bring in only material which helps in that task.

I shouldn't have to say this, but I know how to use Google too, and I regularly fail essays concocted at the last minute out of a few search results. If you want to do well in this assessment, there are no short cuts: you need to do serious work, including a great deal of reading and thinking, throughout the term.

Form is not entirely distinct from content. Think hard about how to present your argument; pay close attention to the clarity and precision of your prose; draft and redraft. Keep in mind that you're writing an essay for a philosophy course, not a political speech, personal credo, or blog comment. You should therefore adopt the appropriate style and approach.

I am happy to discuss your essay with you: please come to my office hours or email to make an alternative appointment. My policy is that I will comment on essay plans (up to a page) but that I won't read complete drafts.

I will, of course, make appropriate allowances for disability and other problems, but it is your responsibility to make me aware of your case.

I mark essays according to (1) the standard marking criteria in the PPR *Undergraduate Handbook*, and (2) the criteria for success stated in these notes. Marking at this level is the application of my expert judgement to your essay as a whole. My feedback is intended to make that judgement explicit, and to help you to improve your work in the future and to develop yourself as a philosopher. Feel free to ask me to explain or expand on my comments, but please be aware that, unless I have marked in ignorance of something important or failed to be properly impartial, I am unlikely to change your grade after the fact.